

Feminist Voices: Indian Women Novelists in English

Pallabi Ghosal

Self – Researcher. She has graduated in English, from the University of Calcutta, Kolkata, India

Abstract— Since the time of inception of the history of civilized mankind, women have been victims of oppression and suppression. Even in literature, they have been denied a voice. It was only in the twentieth century which facilitated the introduction of Education that a quest for self-identification percolated into the minds of the subjugated women. Besides other places of the world, this also has been the scenario in the Indian Subcontinent, where simultaneously with the struggle to attain independence from the British Raj, went on the struggle of self-conscious women or the “New Women” to find ways of emancipation from the dominance of patriarchy and establish an independent identity of themselves. This was visible even in the literary sphere. This paper is aimed at tracing the feminist way of portraying women by eminent novelists like Anita Desai and Shobha De and is also bent upon critically comparing the varying approach of protest against male-chauvinism and patriarchy harboured by the characters created by Anita Desai and Shobha De. While the female characters of Anita Desai remain deeply engaged in the quest for self search instead of acting against the patriarchal system, the bold and defiant steps taken up by the female characters of Shobha De as a means to voice their grievances against the stem patriarchy are bound to leave one in amazement and appreciation.

Keywords— *Feminism, Feminist Voices, New Woman.*

Since times immemorial, women all over the world had been deprived of the basic socio-legal rights by the patriarchal order. In the domain of patriarchal culture, woman was a social construct, a site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires enacted. With the advent of the Twentieth Century, a growing awareness was observed among women regarding their desires, sexuality, self-definition, existence and destiny. As women started seeking their independence and self-existence in the otherwise dominant patriarchal society, it started a revolution all over the world which came to be termed as “Feminism”. Thus, Feminism derived from the Latin word “Femina” meaning woman, is a range of political and social movements and

ideologies that were aimed at achieving political, educational, economic, personal and social equality of both men and women. Simon de Beauvoir’s ‘Le Deuxieme Sexe’ (1949), made an important landmark in the evolution of the feminist theory, as here, she examined the socio-economic, cultural, political and intellectual state of women. She questioned the status and role of women in the convention ridden patriarchal society and came to the conclusion that a woman is not feminine by birth, but she is made so by the process of socio-cultural conditioning,

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”. (Beauvoir 295)

Various other feminists too, came up during this time with their expository and creative write-ups which further inquired into the submissive status of the women in the otherwise patriarchal society and encouraged and shaped the feminists’ struggle to empower women and help them transcend their deprived status. Different countries having different religions and cultures came up with new tales encompassing the plight of the modern women, their dilemmas and conflicts, and their efforts to achieve self-identity and independence and India, too, was no exception.

Feminism in India has existed since the Vedic Period, with the gradually changing face of women coming to light in every ages, with its distinctiveness, in the process carving out a firm place in the Indian Literary scene and since then, Feminism in Indian Literature is commonly conceived as a very exalting concept as massive work on feminism is accomplished through Indian Literature as compared to the exponents of Political and Social sciences.

Simultaneously, along with the dawn of colonialism under the British Empire, western education was introduced in India, which encouraged reformist movements, promotion of women’s institutions, the freedom movement and so on. Education had also inculcated a sense of individuality amongst women and had aroused an interest in their human rights. This facilitated the emergence of New Woman in the socio-political site of the Indian subcontinent and it was then that the feminist trend in Indian literature had appeared on the horizon.

Feminism has played a significant role in shaping the Indian-English novel and the writers who appeared in Indian-English literary scene were also of great importance. They gave birth to a new era which held out for the Indian woman opportunities for a dynamic participation in social life. Indian-English novelists, especially women novelists have made themselves as a significant entity by making the novel itself an instrument of social reform. Feminist writers in India proudly upheld their causes of 'womanhood', through their write-ups. Gradually as Feminism in Indian Literature traversed through the era of British Rule to the Contemporary times, it no longer remained a singular theoretical point of reference; rather it had metamorphosed with time maintaining proportion with historical and cultural realities, levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions of individual women and women in mass. Post-Independence literature reveals the woman's quest: quest for identity; quest for a separate and special place in contemporary society. Besides, several women writers tried to analyze psyche of the exploited woman. After the nineteenth century, there was a change – a protest was recorded and sympathy for women was expressed. In present times, however, it no longer remains confined to being the voice of the suppressed and the oppressed. Rather a discernible recent shift in feminist literature is noticed from the representation of women's victimization to that of their resistance as is seen in the writings of eminent novelists like Anita Desai, Shobha De and Nayantara Sehgal.

Comparing the Feminist Voices of Anita Desai and Shobha De:

Anita Desai, who is considered to be the pioneer of writing on feminist issues, is inclined to analyze Feminine Consciousness with feminine sensibility and psychological point of view. In her attempt to broods over the fate and future of the postmodern women particularly in the male chauvinistic society and highlight the matriarchal struggle, self-freedom, self-identity and self-power against the male dominated world, Desai, much like Virginia Woolf of western literary paradigm, focuses on the minute and subtle images of a tormented, tortured, toiled, trodden and self-frustrated feminism preoccupied with her inner heart, soul and mind, her sulking depression, melancholy, pessimism, self-storming pragmatics surrounding the atmosphere of mankind and makes a fervent appeal for a radiant dawn for the whole female community. She even strives to delve deep into the psyche of the suppressed women who, being haunted by peculiar sense of doom, withdraw themselves into a sequestered world of their own. In order to explore the realities of their lives, Desai vividly discusses how the disparity between male and female leads to the

temperamental incompatibility, conjugal, chaotic and conflicting dilemmas of such subdued women. Lacking the spirit of viewing life with optimism, most of her women characters fail to overcome their existing traumas and apprehensions, therefore leading to their neurotic disorder and self-destruction.

While portraying a world of a subverted, suppressed and thereby dissatisfied woman who is a lonely protagonist, Desai challenges the prevalent version of Indian women stereotype by subverting their quest for fulfillment with an intense dissatisfaction with the family system and hence a resultant unsatisfied ego. Desai's women are mostly engaged in self-search and looking eagerly for the fulfillment of the void they feel even in ties between parents, siblings, friends which in turn render them incomplete. However, unlike in the writings of the writers like Arundhati Roy, or Shobha De, Desai's protagonists does not take recourse to explicit moves of self liberation; rather her characters lodge their protests in their own way, in the typical style of Desai, by way of escapism of one way or the other. Being adamant and eccentric towards the male dominated order and system, the female characters of Desai, silently rebel and take recourse to naturalism and realism socially and economically— in a world of their own, a world where they can be able to confirm their determination, affirmation and freewill.

On the other hand, Shobha De, who has been regarded as, "the high priestess of gossip and innuendo", attempts to turn the pattern of displacement and marginalization upside down. Realizing the need for women to shatter the economic, social, political and cultural barriers posited by various dominating forces of the society throughout the ages, she tries to undo the distorted image of a woman who cries for freedom and equality which goes unheard in the patriarchal world and thereby, presents a trail of female characters, who are sexually liberated and free thinkers---women who are termed as the "New Woman". Such women are very different from the traditional ignorant Indian women as being rebellious in nature; they deny remaining confined in the superficial roles assigned to them by the ruthless patriarchal society. Instead they challenge the orthodoxy of social taboos and seek fulfillment through self-expression in a social environment where there is mutuality, understanding and tenderness. *Feminist New Style*, a journal published in 1927, aptly declared that ---

"The new woman is a blend of physical freedom, sexuality and stamina with feminist self-assertiveness and traditional domestic femininity, a woman who can combine pleasure, career and marriage. They are eager to participate in pleasure as they would do in play, work etc."

Shobha De does not believe in describing her women characters as love slaves or mere help mates at home. As a writer she tries to mirror her feminist mindset while portraying women in her novels. Thus, unlike the traditional women who try to adjust her nature with her man, the female characters of Shobha De, belonging mainly to the urban world, are independent and free from social and moral restrictions. Giving very less or no importance to spirituality, these women have found various ways of seeking pleasure and they don't even hesitate to design their own attitude and behavior which may vary from their counterparts. All they want is freedom from the established gender roles and sexual restraints of the traditional society and so are not submissive and guilty of their affairs. Instead, they remain more assertive, domineering and bold in comparison to men, struggling to seek out their ways of emancipation and realizing their existence in the end as is observed in the portrayal of her characters in her novels like Nisha in '*Sultry Days*', Aasha in '*Starry Nights*' and Karuna in '*Socialite Evenings*'.

The representation of the protagonist, Karuna, in Shobha De's very first novel, '*Socialite Evenings*', as the "New Woman" has been widely appreciated. A middle class girl, Karuna, stands as the perfect example of the misery of women in India. She suffers due to the callous and non-responsive attitude of her husband. However, her quest to find out her 'self' springs from her discontentment and so, despite finding herself trapped within her marriage, unhappy family life and being battered and bruised by divorce, she continues to fight for her identity and existence. Contrary to her father's wishes, she takes up modeling as a career and even acquires a boyfriend named Bunty, which are her acts of rebellion against the puritanical world around her. In order to revolt against her husband and realizing that "I didn't want to deaden myself to life." She even boldly establishes extra-marital relationship with Krish, even though she knew that such kind of affairs are labeled as crime legally; soon she acknowledges and embraces the idea that, "Single was good for me" and so she walks or rather squeeze the life out of a family life of pungent atmosphere where she has no identity, no choice whatsoever--

"Divorce isn't such a dirty word anymore. I'm sure my mother-in-law would feel pretty relieved. May be the husband, too. I've always felt like such an impostor in the house." (52)

and henceforth learns to manage living on her own. She goes on to take up odd jobs ranging from script writing to ad-films and excels rapidly in this field through her hard work, in the process bagging the award as the copyright of the year

and fulfilling her dream of establishing herself as a self-sufficient woman.

Sita, the protagonist of Anita Desai's renowned novel, *Where shall we go this Summer*, however stands in stark contrast to Shobha De's character Karuna. Sita, too, being isolated from her husband and children because of her emotional reactions, is initially portrayed by Anita Desai as a rebellious, non-conformist woman, disgusted and trying to liberate herself from the patriarchal norms. A new woman who, too, is seething in discontentment with her being enclosed within the "four walls" of her house with the expected behavior of an ideal 'mother' and 'wife', she escapes to the island of 'Manori' in search of an 'independent female' status separated from the "male" liberated from patriarchal bondage. However she does not indulge in an attempt to avenge her husband by inclining to an extra-marital relation like Karuna. Instead, in 'Manori', she undergoes a spiritual purification, trying to understand her husband and children and redefining her relationship with them. Though her exiling her own self is an attempt to assert herself but since her children had no scope in the island of her desire, she could not hold herself permanently there. Being bound by her motherly responsibility, she is forced to return to her world obligation and duties. Though the magic of the island still enthralls her she soon realizes the impossibility to revisit the past glory in the island in the present context:

"If it had ever existed-black, sparkling and glamorous as in her memory-it was now buried beneath the soft grey-green mildew of the monsoon, chilled and choked by it" (103)

Reconciling herself to her fate, she strikes a perfect balance between her inner self and the outer world and thus, she remains, like the mythical Sita, of the epic '*Ramayana*', an epitome of ideal womanhood and femininity.

While Sita remains an embodiment of Indian Feminism, Maya, the protagonist of Anita Desai's novel, '*Cry of the Peacock*', is presented as the embodiment of the Post-modernist feminism of the Indian Bourgeois community, culture and society. Married to a psychological intellectual, Gautama, a highly emotional, sensitive and sensuous woman, Maya, finds her husband to possess an "understanding [which] was scant, love was meager". However, as one reads through the novel, the reader finds that her husband loves and cherishes her, but she is never taken seriously as she is a woman. They identify her with "maya" according to Hindu consciousness. This is what repulses her; this is something that she objects to. As time elapses, she becomes more and more restless, brooding over her emptiness that she feels at heart.

"...I had yearned for the contact that goes deeper than flesh- that of thought- and longed to transmit to

him the laughter that gurgled up in my throat as I saw a goat nuzzle, secretly, a basket of sliced melons in the bazaar while the vendor's back was turned, or the profound thrill that lit a bonfire in the pit of my stomach-when I saw the sun unfurl like a rose in the west, the west and farther west...., But those were the times when I admitted to the loneliness of the Human soul, and I would keep silent”(104-105)

This again reminds us of the narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper", where though the narrator's husband, John, loved his wife, being a woman she was paid little attention to and confined to domesticity like a typical housewife and this in turn leads the narrator to suffer from neurotic disorder until she finally turns insane. Maya, in the *Cry of the Peacock*, too experiences loneliness and lack of communication and she feels---

"God, now I am caught in the net of the inescapable, and where lay the possibility of mercy, of release". This net is no hallucination, no. Am I gone insane?..." (Dar 90)

Being a rebel woman, she refuses to identify with it and revolts against it in her own way. She is in search of a new vista for a woman's world- a space where she can be at par with man. Just as the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" fancies a woman trapped behind the yellow wallpaper, which becomes a symbol of confinement and finds solace on imagining her wandering in the garden freely when there is no one around,

"[amidst] those dark grape arbours, creeping all around the garden....."(The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 654)

Desai's Maya, too, seeks her mother who has attained liberty from suppression through death in the natural landscapes and gardens and gets solace in it. However, while the narrator of Gilman, at the end of the story, tears down the yellow wallpaper and metaphorically liberates herself from the confinements in a claustrophobic atmosphere where she is thrust into by the stern, dominant patriarchy, ---

"I have got out at last...you can't put me back..."(The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 656)

Desai's Maya, compromises with her situation, lingers on with the negativities and nihilism imposed by the patriarchy and thus suppressing her self-identity and feminine desire in her heart till she dies.

Shobha De's novel, 'Second Thoughts', houses a protagonist, who too is christened Maya. However Shobha De's Maya is very different in attitude as compared to her namesake in Anita Desai's novel, 'Cry of the Peacock'. A middle class Calcutta girl is married to Ranjan, Shobha De's Maya

possesses a keen desire to discover Bombay and pursue a career in textile designing. But her sense and sensibility are reduced to ashes by a fanciful moody, suspicious, calculating nature of her husband. She seems to be losing her identity every moment when she is with her husband. Just at this moment, almost as a gift of God comes Nikhil, who, in opposition to the dictatorial, disparaging Ranjan, is appreciative of Maya. This is like a ray of hope for Maya: a new way to live, new promises of life to keep which, in turn, makes Maya dedicate herself to Nikhil. She has broken loose from pangs of conscience and she now thinks of enjoying outings and longs for the romantic date with Nikhil.

"I lay awake all night dreaming of a large bird swooping down on me, claws out. Other than the odd mole hunt my body remained uncharted territory." (281)

Thus, the New Woman steps out as bold, fearless, uncaring and looking ahead to assert her individuality and establish her identity.

To conclude in a word or two, it can be said that the post independence Indian woman Novelists in English like Anita Desai and Shobha De focus on how woman in the changed socio-economic conditions, become skeptical to the traditional roles assigned to them by patriarchy and hence renders a voice to the revolting consciousness of women folk to their exploitation and male chauvinism. However, a stark difference is noticed between the treatments of the characters by these two authors. Though the women characters of both Anita Desai and Shobha De voice their grievances against the dominant patriarchy, Anita Desai's characters are seen to strive for liberation but eventually cannot break free completely from the duties and responsibilities that they owe to the society. They fumble to take up bold steps for their emancipation and so the feeling of nihilism becomes their all time companion. On the other hand, Shobha De's female characters are much bolder in voicing their disapproval of dominance of women practiced by the patriarchal society. Emerging as the "New Woman" of the era they pursue their goal of emancipation to its fullest, in the process establishing an independent and strong identity in the society. Shobha De seems to have derived this perception of free women from western feminists and writers as Charlotte Perkins Gilman too, harped on the same notion---

"Women's subordination will only end when women lead the struggle for their own autonomy." (Gilman)

Such an attitude on the part of the females, according to me, is highly appreciable and such "New Women" should be the light bearers of all the timid and submissive "Bhartiya Nari", inspiring them to rise up against all sorts of oppressions and establish themselves independently in the patriarchal setup as does Shobha De's creations---Karuna and Maya.

REFERENCES

- [1] Beauvoir, de Simone. *The Second Sex*, Vintage, 1997
- [2] Bhavyal. "Feminism in Indian Literature" *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies*, vol 3, no.4, 2016, pp. 37-39
- [3] Dar, Bilquees." Feminine Sensibility In Anita Desai\'S *Cry, The Peacock*" *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*, vol 12, no. 2, pp. 88-90
- [4] De, Shobha . *Socialite Evenings*, Penguin Books, 1989
- [5] De, Shobha.. *Second Thoughts*, Penguin Books, 1996
- [6] Desai ,Anita. *Where shall we go this Summer?*, Vikas Publishing House, 1975
- [7] Desai, Anita. *Cry of the Peacock*, Rupa, and Co, 1964
- [8] Hans, Anjali. "Feminism as a Literary Movement in India" *International Research Journal of Applied and Basic Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 7, 2013, pp. 1763-1767
- [9] Kartikey. "Impact of feminism on Indian-English novel writing" *International Journal of Science, Technology & Management*, vol 3, no. 1, 2014, pp. 41-43
- [10] Kaur, Manjit. "Breaking the Stereotype: Women in Indian Fiction in English" *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*, vol.19, no. 6 ,2014, pp. 49-52
- [11] Singh, Pramod Kumar. "Feminism in Indian fiction in English" *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2015, pp. 181-184
- [12] Sinha ,Kamaljit. " New Woman in the Novels of Shobha De" *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, Vol. 8, no. IV, 2017, pp. 038-043
- [13] Stetson, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wall-paper. A Story*, The New England Magazine, 1892